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Student Demonstrations and Confrontations.

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Student unrest in high schools as well as in colleges can be understood as the reflection of a basic problem in communication between students as senders and the school as the receiver-responder. Today's well-informed youth seek change in accord with their ideals but are not heard by those in authority who support traditional interests and values. The school board is responsible for selecting school administrators with leadership which attempts to understand, that can listen to students and not be threatened by conflict. Key principles include looking for latent issues in communications from students, recognizing the importance of expectations and mutual respect, and acknowledging the inevitability of change. (JK)

STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS AND CONFRONTATIONS

W. Walter Menninger, M.D.

I. Introduction

When I received the copy of the program for your meeting, I was interested in the topics of your general sessions, and intrigued by the subject of your first general session, "Are School Boards Obsolete?" I wondered if I shouldn't know the outcome of that discussion before putting together my remarks - although I do assume that you concluded that there was still a contribution to be made by school boards - and so you'll still be in a position to worry about the subject of my remarks - "Student Demonstrations and Confrontations."

It is perhaps ironical that I address you today in the current showplace of "Camelot," and if you know the lyrics, you know,

> "In short, there's simply not
> a more congenial spot
> for happily ever-aftering
> than here in Camelot!"

I do want to comment on what I feel is the important challenge to school boards, namely to be effective citizens' representatives who keep an eye on the direction of our educational system. You are all certainly aware of the tremendous issue

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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of citizens feeling they have a say-so in the education of their children, an issue that has reached such inflammatory proportions in New York City. A key element in our system of government is the principle that we do have a right to be heard and to influence the course of our destiny. It is the school board which is in a pivotal position when it comes to influencing the course of our children's education - and the question of demonstrations and confrontation for the school boards has involved more than just students in some localities. Hopefully, some of my comments on this subject with regard to students may be equally applicable in other kinds of demonstrations and confrontations.

Because of its relationship to violence, the subject of student demonstrations and confrontations has been given some scrutiny by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. We are still in the process of our deliberations and have reached no definite conclusions - our final report on this whole complex subject is not likely until the late spring. What I want to share with you today are some of my own impressions, which stem not simply from my exposure to these issues as a member of this Commission, but from my professional work as a psychiatrist with several different kinds of groups - patients, criminal offenders, healthy young adult volunteers in the Peace Corps and VISTA service, and others.

II Student Demonstrations and Confrontations

Student demonstrations and confrontations in recent years have been a common phenomenon, which have occurred with a seeming increase of frequency, and occurring all over the world - in France, in Japan, in Mexico, in Brazil and the like. In our own country, one summary noted that demonstrations have occurred on more than 100 college campuses, involving more than 100,000 participants, nearly all since the

first demonstrations on the University of California campus at Berkeley only five years ago.

As you know, this problem is not one restricted to the college campus. The problem on the high school level has achieved such prominence that even the Wall Street Journal took note of it, with a feature article this fall. Citing disturbances in Montclair, New Jersey; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Oakland, California, among others, the article observed that the issues in most of the high school situations are not strictly the same as in the colleges. But the tactics often are the same. With the widespread dissemination of information about demonstrations and confrontations, the high school students learn quickly from their older siblings in college.

Why is this happening? What's going on? There is a great challenge to us all to have greater understanding about just what is going on. There is, of course, the natural wish that we could find a simple explanation for the "why" of these disturbances. The search for the simple answer is like the mirage in the desert - it is an illusion which we want desperately to be true and real, and which frustrates us again and again when it eludes our final grasp. The issues are not simple, and in a brief address this afternoon, I hope only to touch on a few factors and issues of importance which may help sharpen our search for answers.

A word about the problem of understanding. To grapple with and come to grips successfully with a problem, you have to go through certain steps. First, you have to know you have a problem - and be aware that often we do a good job of hiding such information from ourselves, especially when we don't want to admit it or perhaps when we're simply not thinking it may be possible. I am reminded of the recent news item

about the obese woman who went to the hospital with a belly ache - only to be told she was going to have a baby; and she refused to believe it almost until they had her on the delivery table.

Once you can admit the existence of a problem, the next task is to define the nature and scope of the problem as objectively as possible, and - in the case of "people" problems - to understand what is the motivation or the dynamic force prompting the problem. With this knowledge, one can begin to consider what kinds of interventions can be made to alleviate the problem.

When you're dealing with people, two important elements in understanding are a willingness to listen, and keeping an open mind. This is easier said than done -- primarily because we don't just respond rationally to problems, we respond emotionally. Would it were possible to keep discussion of problems rational and logical - but it isn't, and that's where we have our hang-ups. It is our emotions that get us all into trouble - and I will elaborate a bit more on this later.

III Communication

I'd like to approach the subject of student demonstrations and confrontations from the standpoint of communications, for these are communications. And as such, if we can single out some elements of the process of communications, we may be better able to understand what the students are trying to tell us with their actions.

A great achievement of man was the development of a refined means of communication by words in order to share ideas. In my clinical work, the task of understanding communication is a vital responsibility. Often, my job is to help people

replace the ineffective or provocative attempts at communication which prompted their referral to me with better, less destructive ways to communicate their strivings and hopes and fears. Consistently, the goals of psychotherapy are to help a patient express himself in words instead of actions.

Yet, actions do speak louder than words - they are often irreversible and embarrassing in ways that words are not. This is not to minimize the fact that words can be indeed a potent and provocative force - this was clearly shown again in the demonstrations in Chicago last summer.

When someone seeks to communicate a message in a reasonable and quiet way and the message, for whatever reasons, is not received or not understood - or not acknowledged, the sender must make greater efforts to communicate his message; he must do so with more emphasis, more intensity, and in such a way as to demand attention. Words give way to actions, and the ultimate result is a breakdown in civilized communications. That's what happens with violence.

In the process of communications, there are component parts which we can examine more closely. There is the sender. There is the receiver. And there is the interactive process which takes place between the two. Let me elaborate some of these elements which have relevance to the subject today.

IV The Senders - The Students

When we talked about student demonstrations and confrontations, the sender, the initiator of the communication is the student, either singly to start with, then collectively through a leader. It is important to note that in the context of our

schools, the students - our kids - are our most important product. And it is appropriate to keep in mind their value to us, and our opinion of them.

What are the characteristics of these kids? Let me quote from one recent assessment, the assessment of the fact-finding Commission appointed to investigate disturbances at Columbia University last year, the so-called Cox Commission. Their summation:

> The present generation of young people in our universities is the best informed, the most intelligent, and the most idealistic this country has ever known. This is the experience of teachers everywhere.
>
> It is also the most sensitive to public issues and the most sophisticated in political tactics. Perhaps because they enjoy the affluence to support their ideals, today's undergraduate and graduate students exhibit, as a group, a higher level of social conscience than preceding generations.

Those are the college students who were yesterday's high school students - and there is no reason to assume that today's high school students are any less deserving of such a description.

But students, particularly high school students, have some other special characteristics. They have the natural struggle of the adolescent to come to grips with becoming an adult. They manifest a drive for growth and change, and a striving, at times quite ambivalent, to be independent, to be in on the action, to "do their own thing." What complicates matters is that they still at times very much want direction and security, somebody telling them what to do.

Before considering what happens when this Sender attempts to communicate, some words are in order about the special characteristics of the Receiver-Responder.

V. The Receiver-Responder...The School

The schools, and especially school boards, are getting messages from a lot of sources in this day and age. And with so many people telling the schools what's wrong with them or what they ought to be doing, we don't usually think of the students as being among the significant communicators. Children are to be seen and not heard. They are supposed to know that we are doing things in their best interests, and they should just do the assignments and leave the "driving to us."

Besides, a lot of others seem to be leaving the load on the schools. More and more, parents seem to be abdicating responsibility for important training of their youth as if the school should handle discipline and training, as well as education in reading, writing and new math.

And there's plenty of criticism about the failures of the school system to educate everyone effectively, with concerns about the poor and the deprived, and distress when the bright children are not fully challenged, etc. There is also criticism that the schools are requiring more and more money - as though somehow it shouldn't cost so much more and people shouldn't have to keep paying more taxes to educate more children in an inflationary world.

Clearly, the school boards and school administrators are busy receiving a lot of messages. So what does happen when the students attempt to say something?

VI. Special Problems in the Process

How can the students - who aren't supposed to say anything anyway, much less have ideas about how the school ought to be run - get themselves taken seriously,

especially when they haven't had any voice before. They have to intrude, and they have to out-shout other voices which are already loudly proclaiming their interests. And then when the student - who is the recipient of all this service and expenditure - when the student has the gall to complain or be critical... just who does he think he is? How much does he know? And why does he have to be so provocative?

Students are hard to listen to! They aren't always as clear in what they are seeking or what they want to say - but they clearly want to be heard now. And they do have their own struggle in finding the best way to relate themselves to their elders. Erik Erikson observed in his book Childhood and Society that, "In their search for a new sense... adolescents have to refight many of the battles of earlier years, even though to do so they must artificially appoint perfectly well-meaning people to play the roles of adversaries."

When they start to express themselves, if you'r over 30, it is hard not to turn them off, to feel you've heard it before, and to disregard or diminish their words. I noted this in the hearings of the Violence Commission, when we asked some leaders of youth movements to tell us what they thought. Clearly, the Commissioners had to work to tune in - and some didn't like at all what they heard.

Let me share with you some words we heard - words which are important because they do represent a strong undercurrent of feeling in a sizeable proportion of young people.

Henry Mayer is a graduate student at the University of California. He was very much involved in the initial efforts at Berkeley to gain some greater flexibility in

the university policy of speakers invited to make addresses on the campus, in what came to be known as the Free Speech Movement. As a representative of youth, here's what he told us:

> Student activists are not the trouble-makers. They are responding as outraged human beings to all the brutalizing and irrational conditions - racism, poverty, militaristic anti-communism, bureaucratic and technological inhumanity - that disfigure and trouble this country and diminish the quality of human life....
>
> I must confess to both amusement and annoyance when I consider the discrepancies in popular American attitudes toward student demonstrations. There seems to be widespread praise, e.g., for students who actively defend liberty in Czechoslovakia, but substantial condemnation of the students who attempt to march for democracy and peace in Chicago.
>
> Students demonstrate because, in the words of a very popular song, they 'can't get no satisfaction' from the callous, arrogant, and hostile people who run this society - the people who neglect the issues and deny the tension, who first ignore protestors, then discredit them, and then beat them up or put them in jail.
>
> Confrontations are always necessary to secure fundamental changes in this country, and such changes are what students - and others- are seeking today. Those who say - in the best tradition of colonial administrators - that they will not be bullied or threatened or coerced into change actually mean that they do not want any change at all. They display the fatal arrogance of power which insures that the next series of confrontations will be angrier and more coercive than the last.

In the vernacular, how does that grab you? What do you think of that view of student demonstrations? Perhaps I should have quoted some of the less well organized and more highly charged observations and opinions of Tom Hayden, one of the founders of the SDS who also appeared before us. But my point in citing these remarks to you is to test your own capacity to listen, and to keep an open line to such ideas, however distasteful you may find them to be from the standpoint of an administrator.

It is the response of the "receivers" to this kind of student message that does

play a vital role in determining subsequent student communications, and will go a long way toward escalating or de-escalating any propensities to disturbance. John D. Rockefeller, III, recently wrote in the Presbyterian Life manazine of his efforts to "tune in" to youth. His conclusion was that the "crucial issue is not the revolt of youth but the nature of the older generation's response to it." I strongly commend to you his article, and his conclusion that his thoughts on this subject would be best addressed, not to the young people about whom he initially felt concerned, but to, as he described it, "that large minority group of persons over the age of forty."

He acknowledges that there is much to irritate and disturb the older generation in the behavior of youth. But he submits that we have let ourselves be distracted by the colorful fringes to the point where we miss the central meanings of today's youthful protest. And it is important to note that in nearly every instance of a student disturbance, the overwhelming majority of students will disavow extreme measures of disturbance, though they may be sympathetic to some of the issues at hand.

VI Kinds of Responses

The responses which are provoked by student demonstrations in educational leaders are important to note - especially the extremes. Again, it is vital to note that many of these responses are primarily the function of our emotional reactions.

Some simply tune out the whole matter, much like a parent who is preoccupied with something important, and who nods when his child says something to him, but who really doesn't hear, and thus disregards the communication.

If there is a reaction, all too often the first reaction and sometimes the only reaction, is a resentful irritation at students for not keeping their place. Or there is a scapegoating - an attempt to blame others for provoking this problem, a denial of real grievances by calling it communist instigated or the like. Confrontation and demonstration are clearly acts which are critical of administrators and what they are doing; they imply the administrator has done a bad job, and nobody likes to be told that - to say nothing of having it done in some publicly critical manner.

Thus extreme responses are often provoked - either of repression, to put the lid firmly on any further attempts, to demonstrate and "show em we won't put up with any nonsense"; or the opposite response of giving in, feeling guilty about some mistake to the degree that an excessive permissiveness is the result. If a boiler has a head of steam and is about to blow up, indeed, the immediate crisis may be staved off by quickly applying stronger boiler plate, or by opening up all the stops to let off the steam. But neither of these extreme reactions is efficient over the long haul.

If we consistently take a repressive line, we don't encourage growth or prompt development of more constructive outlets for the energy of youth. In our excessive response, we can stifle peaceful change - and thus increase the odds for violent change.

At the same time, letting people do anything they want is equally unhealthy. If we are truly concerned about someone, we don't let them do just anything - I don't let my children play with matches or in the street; my doing so would not be a sign of love or caring for them but just the opposite. Excessive permissiveness is as

destructive to growth and maturation in our children as is excessive restriction and control.

VII. So What - Some Guiding Principles

So what should be the response to these challenges from youth? What principles or guidelines can we note which will help in tackling the problems. Let me reiterate the importance in being able to acknowledge the existence of the problem. In any school system, the key persons affected are the administrators and the executive leaders of the school system. It is the superintendent who will have the greatest impact, and his principals beneath him. Thus the role of the school board in selecting that leadership is vital - and the selection should be of leadership which attempts to understand, that can listen and not be so threatened by the conflict.

And there are some key principles to be noted in examining any conflict or issue raised. First, it is imperative to try to understand the message, the communication from the students, and to look for latent issues. We shouldn't be misled by the surface issues and assume that's the whole story. All too often in medicine, we find the chief complaint that brings the patient to us is a kind of "red herring," and only a "ticket of admission" to get our attention and concern so that we will then respond to a more basic problem that becomes evident.

A second principle in responding to the challenge of the students is to recognize the importance of expectations and of mutual respect. An adversary system tends to encourage the development of adversaries. And there is a good bit of experimental work that demonstrates the degree to which our expectations prompt self-fulfilling

hypotheses. It is as if we communicate in some subliminal manner what we expect to happen - and all too often it does; yet we remain oblivious of the degree to which we are responsible for what happens, and instead blame it on others. There were elements of this process which took place in Chicago. I've seen the same process take place in many other settings. You may be aware of the classroom research where some teachers were told that certain students showed particular promise, when such was not truly the case. Yet the teachers' expectations and efforts did result in improved performance by those students.

Expectations work in both a positive and negative way. If you expect students to be unreasonable, the odds are you will deal with them in such a way as to make it inevitable they will prove your hypothesis. Similarly, if you deal with students as adults, you are likely to find them more often responding as adults.

A third principle - acknowledge the inevitability of change. The tide of history is moving in certain directions, and clearly the energy and drive and creation of our children will outlast us. We can wear ourselves out trying to fight the tide, or we can turn that inexorable force to our advantage, and attempt to harness it to our - and their - benefit.

It is vital to realize and acknowledge the struggle of the student, the adolescent with his aspirations. And we must also acknowledge the mirror struggle of our generation. It is no small psychological problem to spend many years of one's life trying finally to get to a position of responsibility and decision-making, only to realize that the time is short. It is easy to forget that we were children - and that our perception of the world still reflects, in some significant ways, the biases we had as children.

VIII Some Specific Suggestions

Another of the persons we were privileged to hear in the hearings of the Violence Commission was the president of Yale University, Kingman Brewster. He had some specific suggestions with regard to coping with the potential for violence in the educational setting, and I would like to share his prescription with you, because I don't think I could word it any better. He offered four suggestions:

First: Protect and encourage peaceful dissent.

Second: protect and encourage participation of the governed in the determination of the policies and actions which govern them.

Third: make every effort to open access to meaningful channels of communication.

Fourth: bend every energy to recreate the fact and the feeling of individual choice and self-determination within organizations.

President Brewster observed that, "These are not prescriptions, they are simply invitations for energetic and ingenious efforts to re-establish a credible, open, voluntary society in which a person feels that what happens to him is in large part his own fault, not the fault of the 'system.'" President Brewster thus focused on another and perhaps crucial factor in this whole problem - the degree to which increasingly in our society, the individual is getting lost in a maze of numbers and computers and bureaucracy. Lost as an individual, it is not surprising to see individuals unite into groups in order to find some new and identifiable character.

It therefore becomes imperative for us to keep the value of the individual high, in spite of the population explosion and the complications of modern society. As we restore the worth of the individual, we will find less intense the need to seek

redemption in groups. Groups are made up of individuals, and they are led by individuals, each of whom has aspirations the same as you and I for concern, attention, love, recognition - a place in the sun.

Several times, I have commented on the degree to which we have difficulty in dealing with problems like student demonstrations and confrontations because of our emotional reaction - a reaction which may reflect our discomfort in acknowledging that we, too, have not yet created the "perfect" world. Without emotions, this world would certainly be a dull place, and even if it were possible, I would not urge we abandon our emotions. But we do need to be alert to them and to the degree they do cause problems for us or interfere with our rational resolution of conflicts with others .

Individually, we must come to acknowledge that the place to begin dealing with the problems we have with others is within ourselves - to be a little less self-righteous and so sure that we have the right answers. No matter how sophisticated or suave a manner we present to the world, we do have within us childish pressures and reactions.

We don't like to be wrong, We don't like to be challenged - especially by people who are younger or in some way less than us. Yet if we are to cope effectively with our children, and with students in our educational system, we must be humble. We must be prepared to consider the possibility of being wrong, or that there might be a better way, without feeling we are destroyed if that is so. If we are so insecure as to feel we are worthless if we make a mistake or are improved upon, if we cannot courageously acknowledge our mistakes and acknowledge the fact that our offspring

might surpass us even now, then we are in deep trouble. We must keep open enough to listen, to "tune in" and to accept constructive criticism with some pride that these suggestions are coming from "our most important products," our students - who thus prove the ultimate worth of the system.